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ABSTRACT

The American space shuttle Challenger's explosion prompted a national grieving process typified by stages of shock, disbelief, acknowledgement, and finally recovery/adaptation. President Reagan's speech on the evening of the disaster assisted this process by integrating content and structure with the psychological needs of the audience. Reagan's speech adhered to classical eulogy structure in that he (1) praised the crew, ancestors, and the country by associating the astronauts with "pioneers" and with Sir Francis Drake; (2) lamented by identifying with the loss felt by the crew's families; and (3) consoled by affirming the continuation of the crew's spirit and bravery in the future space program, and in their immortality with God. He thereby performed the traditional eulogistic functions of acknowledging death, transforming the relationship with the dead from present to past tense, easing the mourners' terror of their own mortality with assurance that the deceased live on, and reknitting the community. The speech also contained elements of deliberative oratory by asserting the continuation of the space program, praising national values, and criticizing Soviet secrecy in similar disasters, creating a hybrid genre in which the president answered the complexity of the grieving process and concentrated on the most prominent stages of loss, recovery and unification. Similar aspects of official eulogy surrounded President Kennedy's assassination, but not the Vietnam-era Apollo disaster, probably because the war precluded any closure of the grief process. (JG)

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the impact that the shuttle disaster had upon the nation in terms of the stages experienced during loss and crisis, and suggests that Reagan's role as President necessitated that he take some action to assist people in moving forward through this tragedy. An examination of his eulogy to the Challenger assesses his use of the eulogistic form in meeting those needs.

A Rhetorical Balm: Eulogy for the Challenger

"The essence of tragedy is that humans are the playthings of the gods: that people's lives are vehicles for the expression of cosmic forces, that people's fortunes must often submit to forces beyond their control." [1] Occasionally a tragedy occurs which is of such magnitude that an entire nation experiences the loss, and individually, yet collectively mourns. Because the event is so unsettling, the nation as a whole may have the sense that it is necessary to move through a grieving process and attempt to restore the meaning in life which loss often calls into question. The explosion of the space shuttle Challenger was such an event.

This paper seeks to investigate both the personal and Presidential responses to the Challenger disaster first by looking at the nature and stages of crisis events and losses. Secondly, the speech which the President gave in response to the tragedy will be examined in regard to the necessity for the speech, the content of the speech, and the way in which the speech was framed to meet the psychological needs of the people of this nation.

Responding to Crisis and Loss

In examining the shuttle disaster there are elements of tragedy and loss but also elements of crisis. To better understand the mood of the nation it is useful to define the stages which typically evolve as a result of loss or crisis. Crisis is appropriate terminology because there was an unexpected "event" which precepitated the distress. A crisis is by definition a short term phenomenon which can be seen as a turning point or a crucial moment. Although a crisis is short term, certainly the process of resolving the emotional states created by a crisis can be long term. Resources must be mustered to move beyond initial stages if there is to be some form of

resolution. Sometimes those resources are part of our repetoire and sometimes the resources must be provided externally. There are identifiable stages which people move through at a time of crisis. The initial reaction is one of shock which gives way to defense retreat or a state of disbelief. When retreating is no longer a viable response people then begin to acknowledge what has happened. This stage may be extremely anxiety-ridden since it is at this point that the reality of what has happened is tru ly addressed. At this stage the emotions we associate with the grieving process receive expression: guilt, frustration,anger,fear,abandonment and so forth. Finally, assuming that resources have enabled resolution the last stage is one of adaptation.[2] The psychological responses of grief and mourning have been categorized in a similar manner. The first phase is invigoration, or a form of heightened awareness and increased energy, followed by aggression which involves both frustration and anger. The third stage is that of depression while the fourth stage is one of recovery.[3] Although these stages experienced in crisis and loss are not identical the similarities are pronounced.

Upon receiving news of the disaster it was reported that the President's "eyes went wide, his mouth opened in total surprise and shock" and later describing his feelings as he watched replays of the explosion again and again President Reagan said, "It just was--I say--a very traumatic experience". [4] This same reaction was mirrored throughout the country: the shock, the disbelief, the futile ritual of watching the footage of the explosion over and over.

As the sense of loss superceded the disbelief it was decided that for the first time ever the State of the Union Address which was to be delivered that evening would be postponed and instead the President would speak on the

Challenger disaster. Thus, the President would attempt to begin the healing process by speaking to the nation about the shuttle tragedy.

Although in recent memory there have been other deaths of a national scope which have deeply touched our national consciousness, there are two events which seem particularly parallel to the Challenger disaster , albiet for different reasons : the death of John Kennedy and the deaths of the Apollo astronauts. The assasination of John Kennedy resulted in a similar outpouring of grief although the circumstances of his death provided a clearer target for anger. (In the shuttle disaster the equivalent for the anger would probably be blame placing. Media coverage immediately began "investigating" the probable errors which caused the disaster.) Kennedy was clearly an authorized representative of the country, unlike Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy and others. Like John Kennedy, the Apollo astronauts were sanctioned public figures performing their jobs and dying in the line of duty. The circumstances of their lives and deaths correspond closely enough to those of the Challenger crew to warrant comparison.

Offical reaction to the deaths of these public figures in light of the stages of dealing with loss provide an interesting backdrop to the discussion of the Challenger. On the eve of the Kennedy assasination Lyndon Johnson offered a simple statement of sorrow to the nation:

> This is a sad time for all people. We have suffered a loss that cannot be weighed. For me it is a deep personal tragedy. I know the world shares the sorrow that Mrs. Kennedy and her family bear. I will do my best. That is all I can do. I ask for you help--and God's.[5]

Johnson's message acknowledges the tragedy but his brief and melancholy speech reflects that he has not had time to personally move through the tragedy enough to perform rites of healing for the nation. He instead asks the nation for help.

Eulogies delivered the day after the assassination , while retaining the elegiac tone provide elements of recovery or adaptation as well. These speakers acknowledge the pathos of the moment, eulogize the man and try to make some reaffirming statements for those in mourning. For example, Chief Justice Earl Warren says, " It has been said that the only thing we learn from history is that we do not learn. But surely we can learn if we have the will to do so. Surely there is a lesson to be learned from this tragic event."[6] John McCormack, then Speaker of the House, concluded his eulogy with these words: "We must have the determination to unite and carry on the spirit of John Fitzgerald Kennedy for a strengthened America and a future world of peace."[7]

When the three Apollo astronauts, Grissom, White, and Chaffee died in a fire during a test on the launch pad in 1967 it was again an occasion of national grief. However, the eulogies were more informal. President Johnson expressed his sorrow with this brief statement: "Three valiant young men have given their lives in the nation's service. We mourn this great loss and our hearts go out to their families." [8] Additionally, *The New York Times* reported that Defense Secretary Robert McNamara sent the following message to the families of the astronauts:

> Our brave men in uniform whether in Vietnam or seeking the frontiers of the future, mourn with all of us the tragic

loss of three gallant and dedicated American airmen. To the families...we send our deepest condolence."[9]

His statement captured a theme which was unspoken by the President but probably accounted for the comparatively unemotional response to these astronauts who preceded the shuttle crew in deaths related directly to space exploration. The political reality is that life cannot be as valuable in a time of war. In a time of peace a nation's leaders can afford to mourn the loss of individual lives more publicly.

The social forces were such that when the shuttle disaster occurred the astronauts became symbols of a loss in much the same way as Kennedy had. In the post-Vietnam era social critics charged that we were a nation without heroes, but on January 28th, 1986 that ceased to be true, at least for many. The deaths of the shuttle crew sent tremors of grief across the country and coalesced its people in a tragic bond. Most people felt a sense of common fate with those who had died, as if somehow we who were earthbound had sent a small part of ourselves on this oddessy. For some the astronauts were symbols of intangible qualities, for some they were representative of us as a nation, and for some they seemed like close friends even though the friendship was forged through the media. *The New York Times* interviewed several persons including religious leaders, writers, students, educators, and scientists concerning their perspectives on the disaster. One said," I cannot help but note that for me this flight somehow symbolized America as we are trying to make it, an America with a black, an Asian, a

woman, and with white men...." Another remarked, "I have a terrible feeling of sadness, I want to weep." Still another said, "It's not something that happened to someone else. It happened here in this country and I'm in this country."

Yet, there was another response to the shuttle explosion. For some the explosion was viewed in human terms, others were more detached, more clinical. Some concentrated on "failed technology" and were quick to note "they knew the risks". Two of the respondents in the *New York Times* interviews barely alluded to the loss of the crew but instead spoke in terms of unraveling the causes and assessing the accident's impact on the space program: "We assume they'll pin down the cause of the accident and fix it. The only real question is how much of a pause there will be in this year's ambitious space program; 1986 was going to be a banner year for the space program" and another remarked, "(I see a need)... to find out what caused the accident and take corrective action and then press on. It's already happened, so there's nothing you can do about it." For some perhaps "they knew the risks" was a form of denial or defense retreat. As social scientists we are aware of the tendency for people to blame victims for their own misfortunes in an effort to suggest that we have control over our own fates. For others it seems that technology is significant and worthy of sacrifice and people are transitory, just a mechanism in the works.

Words of Recovery and Adaptation

While individual reactions differed, the President's role was shaped by the demands of the office. As one journalist wrote:

> He must identify with the ensuing national grief--lead the mourning, in a sense--but he must also confine it and direct it, lest it evolve into a sense of national

> despair and futility...if possible (he must) transform it eventually from a negative into a positive force...[10]

Reagan, by virtue of his position, was capable of administering the therapeutic words to an ailing constituency. It was in fact, his mandate to assist people in moving forward toward resolution of this crisis.[11]

To accomplish this directive the President decided to make a speech , to give a eulogy for the space shuttle Challenger and its crew. Subsequently, the form of his speech will be analyzed in terms of the expectation of epideictic oratory and the use of deliberative oratory.

Eulogy is categorized as epideictic oratory . It is concerned with the present and is closest in style and function to poetry. The usual structure of a eulogy involves praise, lament, and consolation. [12] In ancient Greece this praise often took the form of first honoring the ancestors of the dead, and in so doing, praising the greatness of the country. Secondly, those who had died were praised.

To a great extent Reagan's speech follows the formulaic expectations of the genre. Although his introduction expresses his pain and grief his subsequent words invoke the memory of the Apollo astronauts. He then offers praise for the Challenger crew saying, " And perhaps we've forgotten the courage it took for the crew of the shuttle...We mourn seven heroes."[13] He appeals to our collective consciousness of the great journeys of our ancestors when he speaks of the astronauts as pioneers. He states, " We're still pioneers. They, the members of the Challenger crew, were pioneers." Finally, he once again calls up the positive imagery of explorers and pioneers in his final paragraph when he speaks of the life and death of Sir Francis Drake.

In the course of the speech he offers a lament for the astronauts as well as for their families. He says "we cannot bear, as you do, the full impact of this tragedy but we feel the loss and we're thinking about you so very much." He provides consolation when he says, " the Challenger crew was pulling us into the future and we'll continue to follow them." He offers the consolation of a continuation of their spirit and bravery and then concludes by saying:

> We will never forget them nor the last time we saw them this morning as they prepared for their journey and waved goodbye and "slipped the surly bonds of earth to touch the face of God."[14]

In Western culture it is suggested that a eulogy serves several functions. The eulogy acknowledges the death, transforms the relationship between the living and the dead from present to past tense, eases the mourners' terror at confronting their own mortality by assuring that the deceased live on, and reknits the community.[15] Certainly Reagan's speech met all of the criteria for epideictic oratory in both form and function.

President Reagan's speech, while acknowledging the tragedy also was an exercise in reaffirming the idea that, in his words "We'll continue our quest in space...nothing ends here." The dichotomy in reaction to the space shuttle disaster may in fact reflect a duality within the American character. Remarks made by a Truman biographer provide an insightful observation. It is noted that Americans are often seen as lacking a sense, shared by many Europeans, that life is essentially tragic. "When something, be it the plumbing or the government, breaks down, Americans typically do not say, 'Well, that's life.' Instead they try to fix the trouble..." [16] There is an element in his speech which does not seek to sooth mourners and explain

existing conditions but rather is a statement of what will be done. This type of oratory is classified as deliberative. Jamieson and Campbell identified these "infusions" of form as "rhetorical hybrids". [17] Rhetorical hybrids are a blend of genres. For example, a speaker might perform deliberative oratory while engaging in a seemingly epideictic form. The thinly veiled differentiation of U.S. and Soviet society is such a departure from the expected. The President says, "We don't hide our space program, we don't keep secrets and cover things up. We do it all up front and in public. That's the way freedom is...." Reagan's words to the people of NASA and his assurances regarding the future of the space program throughout the speech contain this intermingling of policy with poetry.

Crisis Based Eulogy: Evolution and Intent

Genres are useful because they have predictive value. They have predictive value because they are framed by such repetitive human occurences as celebrations, rituals of state and church, death and other transitions. Circumstances, situations and audience needs shape the content of the rhetor's message. Consequently, it can be expected that there are special demands placed upon the speaker in a "crisis based eulogy" that are not present in less extraordinary times.

Coming to terms with a sudden tragedy involves an evolution through predictable stages of shock, disbelief, acknowledgement and recovery or adaptation. Therefore, it follows that a "crisis based eulogy" would adhere to those predictable stages. Since the healing process actually begins with acknowledgement the bulk of the speech should appeal to the audience at the levels of acknowledgement and adaptation. In this case, the President becomes the external force necessary to help the nation recognize its own resources in moving toward resolution of the tragedy. He

provides "outside intervention" in much the same manner that a counselor, a minister or a friend might offer support.

His rhetorical strategy must respond to the complexity of the grieving process. The hybrid form allows the President the ability to respond with more complexity but even more important, it can be seen as an expected outgrowth of the demands of the situation.

Additionally, this genre is rule governed and therefore will follow certain prescriptions. Jamieson and Campbell caution that inappropriate or excessive use of one genre in a situation which mandates the use of a different genre renders the speaker ineffectual and his/her motives suspect:

> We would argue that the functional hybrid will occur when deliberative appeals are subordinate to the eulogy, when they can be viewed as a memorial to the life of the deceased, when they are compatible with positions advocated by the eulogist, whose motives must not appear self-serving, and when advocacy will not divide the audience or community.[18]

The President is expected to concentrate on the recovery stage in the aftermath of national grief and therefore can make stronger deliberative appeals without being judged self-serving or divisive. This is illustrated by his "criticism" of Soviet secrecy which is not particularly appropriate in the context of memorializing the astronauts. Again, there is an expectation that he will emphasize "what will be done", that he will unify the people by praising our values, that he will help us recover by bonding the community. If the President were giving a "non-crisis" eulogy one could predict a lower level of deliberative discourse would be deemed acceptable. Crisis discourse demands a high level of future orientation.

This orientation toward recovery or re-knitting the community was absent in Johnson's eulogy immediately after John Kennedy's assassinatioon but was integral in the mediated address he gave before a Joint Session of the Congress the following week.[9] While a major crisis event can be expected to engender a predictive form of "crisis based eulogy" there are still contextual constraints. This accounts for the absence of official eulogy in the deaths of the Apollo astronauts. While the nation was shocked and saddened, societal demand for healing through rhetoric was probably not as great because the continuing loss of life in Vietnam precluded any closure of the grief process. And as mentioned previously, it would be difficult to honor the astronauts as heroes with so many dying so anonymously.

Conclusions

In examining precedents for "crisis eulogy" the complexity of the form is evident. The complexity evolves because the speaker must respond to the psychologically complex process of resolving loss. People have different responses to loss or crisis which are largely individual; yet, the events which make martyrs and heroes are subject to the social milieu. Ultimately, the President's role is dictated by the needs of the nation which typically require that he take an active role in the grieving process through the healing power of words.

In the Challenger eulogy Reagan effectively integrates the speech content with the psychological needs of the audience. He provides an outlet for lament and acknowledgement but then channels that grief. His many allusions to the idea that these astronauts lives were vehicles for human progress help the listeners make sense out of the tragedy, assure them that they are not merely playthings of the gods, and move them toward adaptation and recovery. Finally, the speech taps into the two most

prominent phases of loss, and it could be argued , the two different vantage points held by the American people immediately after the accident: there are those who must grieve and those who simply press on.

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[5] Lyndon Johnson, Vital Speeches of the Day, "Eulogy to John F. Kennedy", Vol. XXX, 4, 1963: 98.

[6] Earl Warren, Vital Speeches of the Day, "Eulogy to John F. Kennedy", Vol.XXX,4,1963: 99.

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[8] "Johnson Voices Sorrow at Loss of Three Valiant Young Men'," *New York Times* 28 January 1967: A10.

[9] Ibid.

[10] R.W. Apple,"The President As Healer", *The New York Times*, January 28, 1986, p.A18.

[11] In his article "The President As Healer", Apple suggests that de Gaulle and Churchill met similar "national crises" with their defiant and celebrated rhetoric of World War II. He goes on to say that failure to met the need of the people in crises ruined Hoover's Presidency in the Depression, Johnson's after the Tet offensive, and Carter's after the hostage crisis.

[12] George Kennedy , The Art of Persuasion in Greece (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963) 153.

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14 This paraphrase from the sonnet "High Flight", by John Magee Jr. serves a poetic function but also comforts the audience with an affirmation of immortality.

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